

On the road to inclusion? Child wellbeing trends in Malaysia

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Introduction

World Children's Day is dedicated to celebrating children and acknowledging their struggles. In Malaysia, economic growth and expansion of healthcare and schooling means children today enjoy a higher standard of living, are healthier and are more educated than past generations. But inequality, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, has raised concerns on progress tackling child-specific issues.

While in no way comprehensive, this piece explores recent trends and raises key issues affecting children that all parents, guardians and changemakers must know.

Views are short opinion pieces by the author(s) to encourage the exchange of ideas on current issues. They may not necessarily represent the official views of KRI. All errors remain the authors' own.

This view was prepared by Jarud Romadan Khalidi and Puteri Marjan Megat Muzafar, researchers from the Khazanah Research Institute (KRI). The authors are grateful for the valuable comments from Ilyana Syafiq Mukhriz Mudaris.

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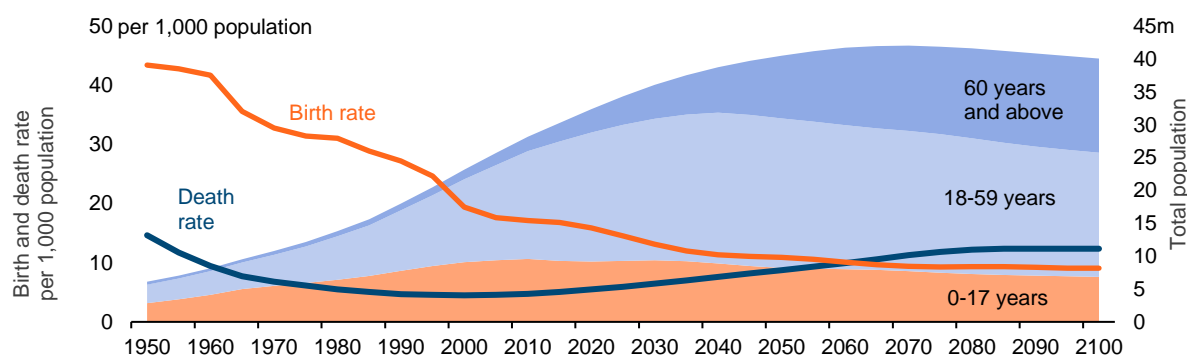
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Our children's population is growing...but not for long

Malaysia is home to around 9.2 million children (i.e. persons aged below 18 years old)¹, making up 28% of the country's population². The number of children has risen steadily in the last few decades, but is expected to reverse soon due to the declining birth rate. By 2050, the number of children is projected to drop to 8.2 million, making up just 20% of the population (Figure 1). At the same time, the number of older persons (i.e. aged 60 and above) will exceed the number of children, in part due to lower death rates and longer life expectancy.

Figure 1: Birth and death rate per 1,000 population and total population by age group, 1950 – 2100

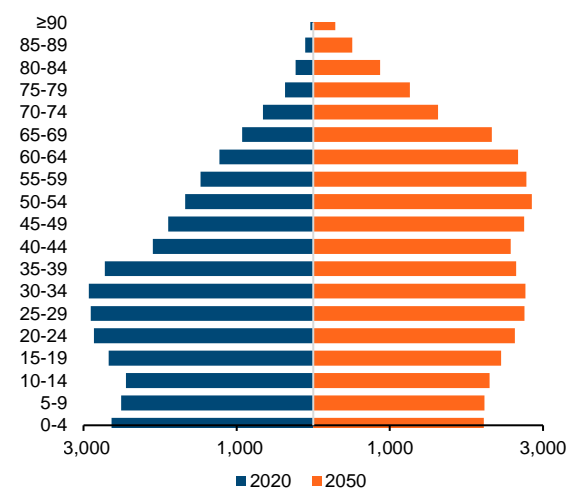


Source: CEIC (n.d.), authors' calculation

Fewer workers of tomorrow but higher care burden, a pressing need to address children issues now

These children will grow up to become the workers of tomorrow. If the trend in Figure 1 continues, the shrinking working-age population will face a higher burden to care for both the elderly and the young (Figure 2). In 2020, for every 100 working-age persons, there are 44 children and older persons³. In 2050, the number of dependents will rise to 51 children and older persons.

Figure 2: Total population by age group, 2020 and 2050



Source: CEIC (n.d.), authors' calculation

¹ This definition follows the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This definition is also in line with Malaysia's Children and Young Persons (Employment) Act 1966 (Act 350) although the Act distinguishes children from young adults: Children are persons aged under 15 and young adults are persons aged 15 to 17. Source: UN General Assembly (1989), GOM (1966)

² CEIC (n.d.), authors' calculation

³ Working-age persons are those aged 15 to 64, children aged under 15 and older persons aged 65 and above.

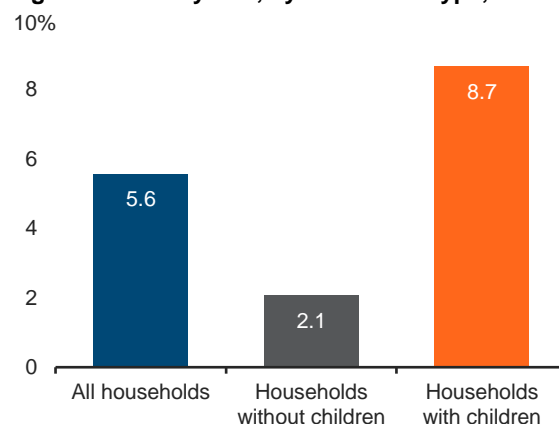
To create a healthy and productive workforce who are able to cope with increasing demands, it is critical to address the challenges that children are facing now, including poverty, education and health.

Children more likely to live in poverty than adults

In 2019, out of 405 thousand households living in poverty, 335 thousand are households with children. The poverty rate for children is higher than the national rate as close to 9% of households with children are poor compared to almost 6% for all households and around 2% for households without children (Figure 3)⁴. This is expected, given larger households must spend more to meet their basic needs and generally children are not income-earners.

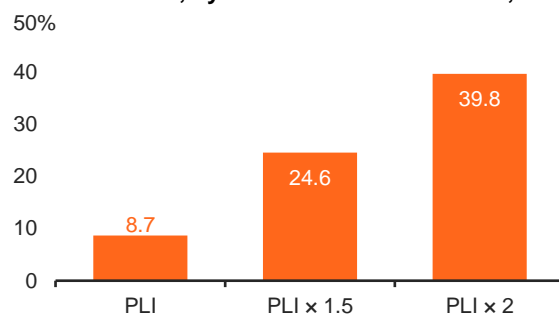
Households with children are vulnerable to falling into poverty as many earn just above their poverty line income (PLI). To put into perspective, if the current average PLI is doubled from RM2,208 to RM4,416 the poverty rate for households with children increases from 9% to almost 40%—an increase of 4.6 times. Given the rise in the national poverty rate from 5.6% in 2019 to 8.4% in 2020, child poverty has likely worsened too⁵.

Figure 3: Poverty rate, by household type, 2019



Source: DOS (2021a), authors' calculations

Figure 4: Share of households with children that earn below PLI, by alternative PLI threshold, 2019



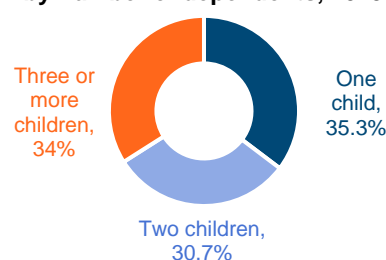
Source: DOS (2021a), authors' calculations

⁴ At the time of writing, the 2019 child poverty rate i.e. the number of poor children divided by the total number of children, was not available. Readers can refer to Redmond et al. (2016) for past statistics on child poverty which used the PLI based on the 2004 methodology. Thus, the statistics in Redmond et al. (2016) are not comparable to Figure 3 and Figure 4.

⁵ DOS (2021b)

Contrary to the assumption that poorer households have more children, in 2019, out of 2.91 million households in the Bottom 40 group (B40), 477 thousand (16.4%) of them live with children aged 18 years and below⁶. 66% of the B40 group with children only have around one or two dependents (Figure 5). In reality, more than 60% of children in Malaysia live in non-B40 households⁷.

Figure 5: Breakdown of B40 households with children by number of dependents, 2019



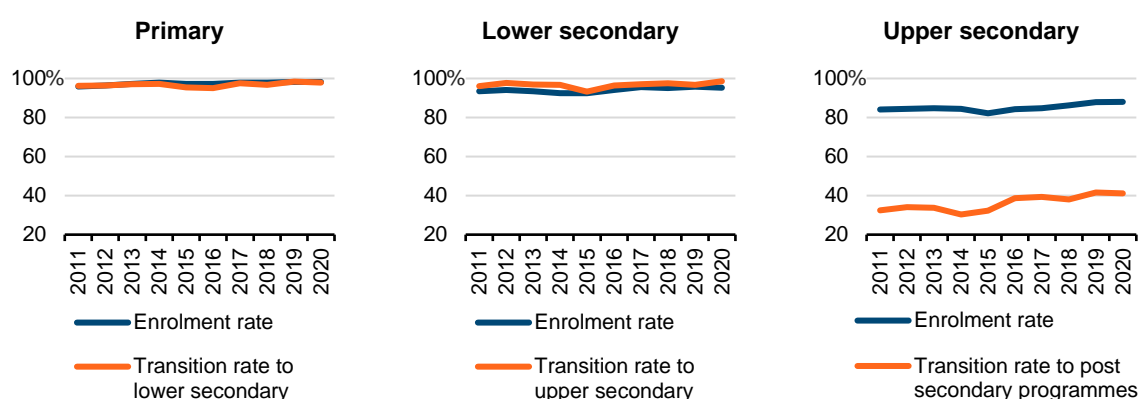
Source: EPU (2021)

As social assistance measures are largely for low income households, most children are excluded⁸. Currently, Malaysia lacks legislation in the provision of social security for children, resulting in social assistance measures that have weak institutionalisation and cover narrow populations⁹. Unless their caregivers are covered by social insurance schemes, children have no social security to help cope with income shocks.

Education inequality persists

Enrolment in primary and secondary education is high, but the percentage of students who transition from secondary to post-secondary education is low (Figure 6). Only 40% of Form 5 students transition to post-secondary programmes under the Ministry of Education. Understanding who transitions and what are the reasons or barriers to not continue schooling may be of value as it could shed light on unequal opportunities in tertiary education.

Figure 6: Enrolment and transition rate in government schools and programmes, by education level, 2011 – 2020



Note: For primary and secondary levels, only government and government-aided schools included. For post-secondary programmes, only Ministry of Education programmes included.

Source: MOE (2021)

⁶ DOS (2020a), authors' calculations

⁷ DOS (2021a), authors' calculations

⁸ KRI (2021)

⁹ KRI (2021)

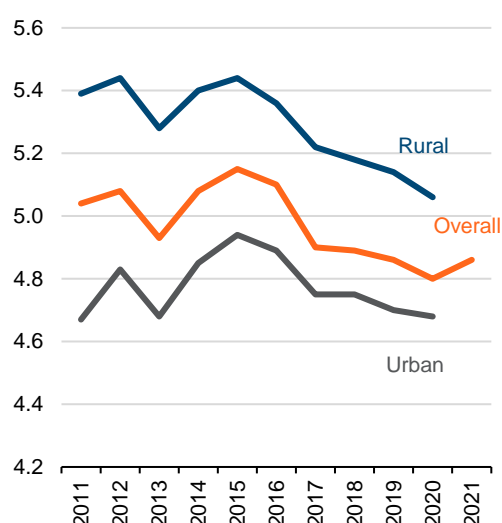
The national average grade (*gred purata nasional*, GPN)—an indicator for performance in a standardised exam of a particular schooling year, with a lower value indicating better performance—for Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) has generally improved from 2015, even in 2020 when students experienced school closures although it slightly deteriorated in 2021 (Figure 7).

However, Figure 7 highlights the persistence of education inequality, as there is an achievement gap between students in urban and rural areas. This disparity has been linked to rural schools' worse infrastructure, limited access to technology and teaching resources, and utilisation of obsolete teaching materials¹⁰. Other forms of discrimination also exist. Children from poor households, in Sabah and Sarawak, and undocumented children face various barriers to attending school¹¹.

While SPM results paint an optimistic picture of our children's learning during the onset of the pandemic, international experiences suggest otherwise¹². The World Bank (2021) estimates students lose up to 1.3 years of learning because of the 42-week school closures in 2020 to 2021, one of the longest periods of closures in the region¹³. This effect is strongest among disadvantaged children who lack resources to access learning remotely.

Education inequality matters as it impedes a child's right to learn and results in future losses during adulthood. According to same World Bank study, the future monetary losses due to the school closures can reach up to 10% of expected earnings.

Figure 7: National average grade for SPM, by stratum, 2011 – 2021



Note: Only national GPN is available for 2021.
Source: MOE (2021), Firdaus Azil (2022)

¹⁰ Ardi Marwan, Bambang Sumintono, and Nora Mislan (2012)

¹¹ UNHRC (2020)

¹² In the Netherlands—which provides a “best-case scenario” as the country closed schools for a relatively short 8-week period and has a strong infrastructure for online learning—researchers found student performance on a national exam declined by 3 percentile points or equivalent to one-fifth of a school year, with the effect being 60% larger among students from disadvantaged homes. Source: Engzell, Frey, and Verhagen (2021)

¹³ World Bank (2021)

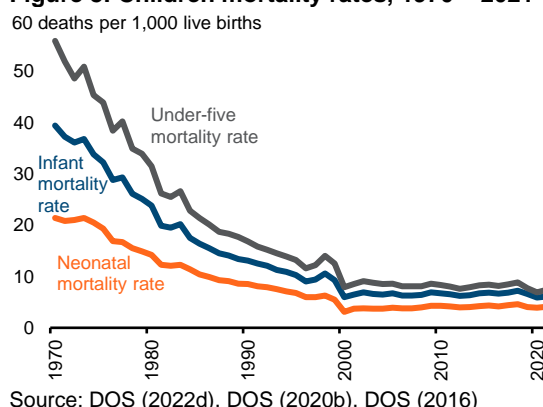
Child mortality reduced but there is room for improvement

Malaysia has made tremendous progress in reducing child mortality rates. In fact, in terms of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), Malaysia has already met and exceeded the 2030 target which is to reduce neonatal and under-five mortality rates down to 12 and 25 deaths per 1,000 live births respectively.

Figure 8 shows in 2021,

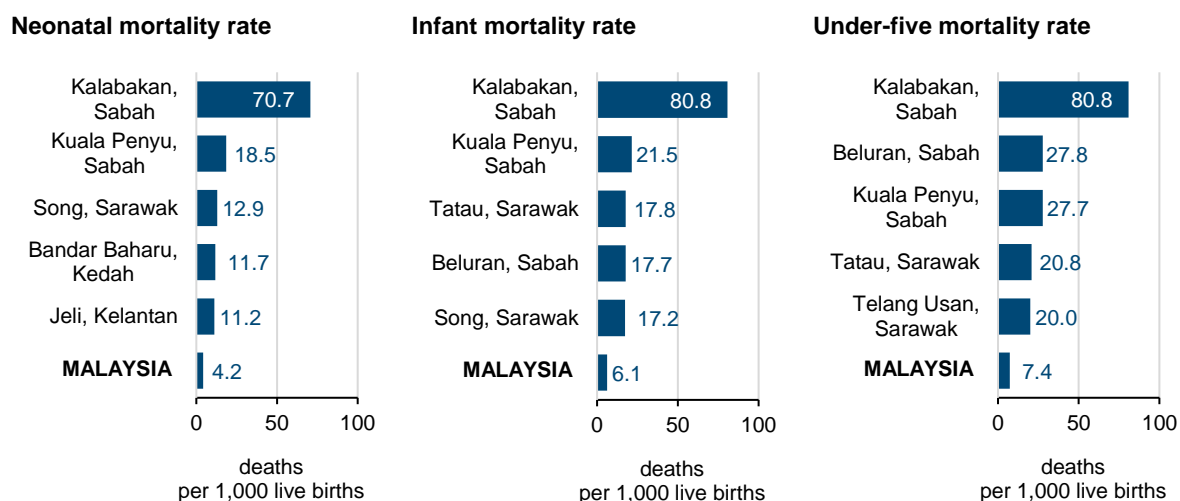
- Neonatal mortality rate is at 4.1 deaths per 1,000 live births, compared to 21.4 in 1970.
- Infant mortality rate is at 6.1 deaths per 1,000 live births, compared to 39.4 in 1970.
- Under-five mortality rate is at 7.4 deaths per 1,000 live births, compared to 55.9 in 1970.

Figure 8: Children mortality rates, 1970 – 2021



However, there have been persistent gaps across localities. Despite the low national child mortality rates, there are districts showing high rates, recording 2 – 5 times the national figure (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Top five districts with the highest child mortality rates, 2021



Note: There is a fluctuating pattern of annual mortality rates. However, due to the creation of new administrative districts as at Census 2020 and some districts only recorded values since 2021, only 2021 mortality rates are used in this analysis.
Source: DOS (n.d.), authors' calculations

Children suffering from the triple burden of malnutrition, mental health problems and disabilities

Good early life nutrition is an important foundation of lifelong health. However, Malaysia is currently facing the challenge of a ‘triple burden of malnutrition’ in which segments of children’s population are undernourished, micronutrient deficient and overweight/obese (Figure 10).

Figure 10: The triple burden of malnutrition

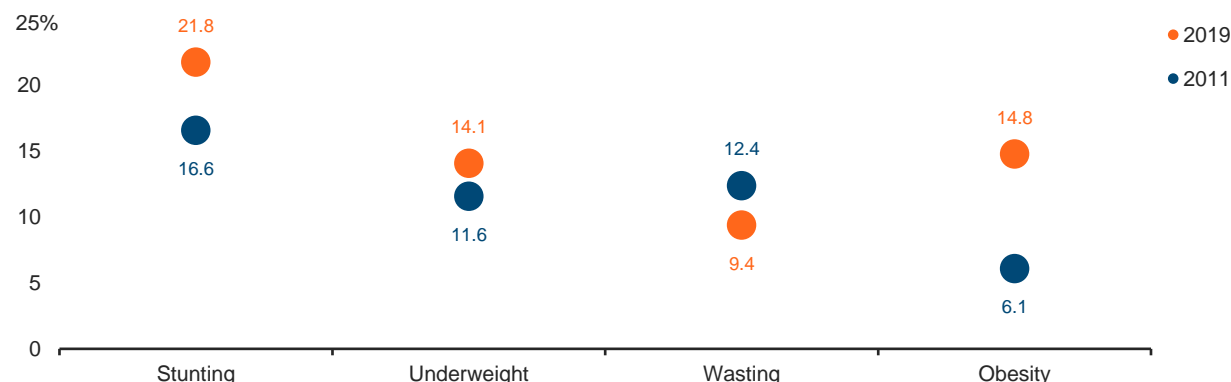
1. Undernutrition including stunting (too short for their age), underweight (too light for their age) and wasting (too light for their height)	2. Micronutrient deficiencies or hidden hunger (lacking important vitamins and minerals)	3. Overweight and obesity that is the body mass index (BMI) being too high for their age
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Source: UNICEF (2019)

About one in five children aged under 5 are stunted, one in 10 underweight and one in 10 wasted (Figure 11).

At the opposite end of the spectrum, one-third of kids aged 5 – 17 are either overweight or obese, ranking Malaysia as the second highest for child obesity rate among Southeast Asian countries, behind Brunei¹⁴. Except for wasting, all indicators worsened from 2011.

Figure 11: Share of children with stunting, underweight, wasting and obesity, 2011 and 2019



Note:

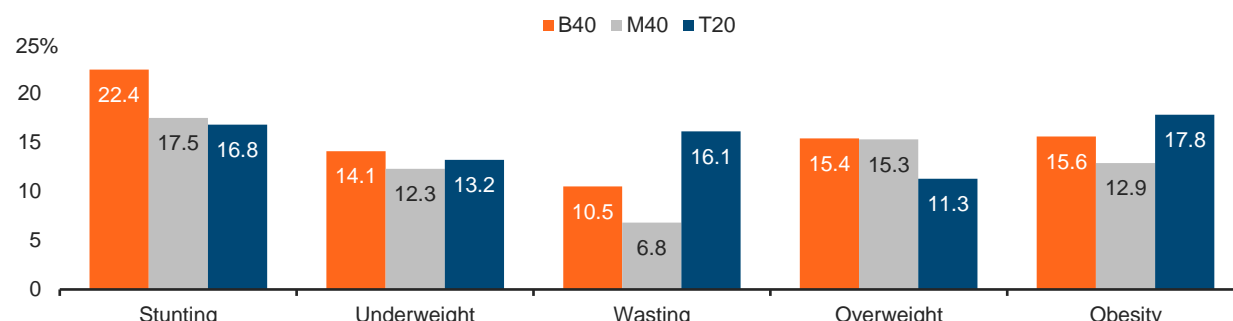
1. Stunting, underweight and wasting rates are for children aged under 5 and obesity rates are for children aged 5 – 17
2. The nutritional status of children aged under 5 is defined using the WHO Growth Standard 2006. A child is considered stunted, underweight and wasted if their height-for-age, weight-for-age and weight-for-height z-scores are more than two standard deviations below the median of the reference population, respectively
3. The nutritional status of children aged 5 – 17 is defined using the WHO Growth Reference 2007. A child is considered obese if their BMI-for-age z-score is more than three standard deviations above the median of the reference population

Source: IPH (2020)

¹⁴ WHO (n.d.)

Child malnutrition is not unique to the poor but cuts across income groups (Figure 12). About 22% and 17% of children in B40 and T20 households, respectively, are stunted. For obesity, the rates for the B40 and T20 do not differ much, at 16% for the former and 18% for the latter.

Figure 12: Share of children with stunting, underweight, wasting, overweight and obesity, by income group, 2019



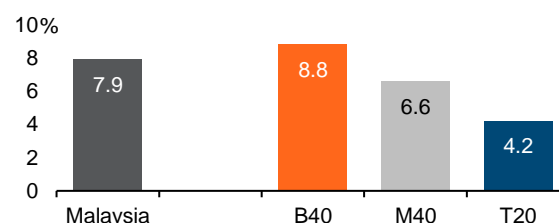
Note:

1. Stunting, underweight and wasting rates are for children aged under 5, and overweight and obesity rates are for children aged 5 – 17
2. The nutritional status of children aged under 5 is defined using the WHO Growth Standard 2006. A child is considered stunted, underweight and wasted if their height-for-age, weight-for-age and weight-for-height z-scores are more than two standard deviations below the median of the reference population, respectively
3. The nutritional status of children aged 5 – 17 is defined using the WHO Growth Reference 2007. A child is considered overweight if their BMI-for-age z-score is more than two but up to three standard deviations above the median of the reference population and obese if their BMI-for-age z-score is more than three standard deviations above the median of the reference population
4. Wasting rates for M40 and T20, and stunting rate for T20 have high relative standard error and should be interpreted with caution

Source: IPH (2020)

Psychosocial distress and poor mental health are not uncommon for children. The prevalence of mental health problems among children aged 5 to 15 is almost 8% (Figure 13)¹⁵. The prevalence is highest for the B40, lower for the M40 and lowest for the T20.

Figure 13: Share of children with mental health problems, by income group, 2019



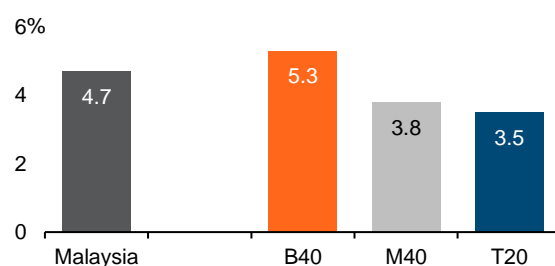
Note: For children aged 5 – 15. Prevalence for T20 has high relative standard error and should be interpreted with caution.

Source: IPH (2020)

¹⁵ Information on mental health problems among children aged five to 15 was obtained from their parents/guardians through the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). Parents/Guardians answer the SDQ based on their understanding or perception of a child's behaviour over the past six months. The SDQ is divided into five sets of questions which focus on different problems namely (1) conduct problems, (2) emotional problems, (3) hyperactivity, (4) peer problems and (5) pro-social skills. With each set consisting of five questions, the SDQ totals 25 questions. Possible responses for each question and their scores are as follows: 0 for "Not True", 1 for "Somewhat True" and 2 for "Certainly True". The scores from questions on conduct problems, emotional problems, hyperactivity and peer problems added together yield the total difficulties score. The possible range of scores for each set is zero to 10 and zero to 40 for the total difficulties score. Children who recorded scores of 14 or more are classified as having some mental health problem. Source: Goodman and Goodman (2009)

Children with disabilities are identified as one of the most marginalised populations, facing higher risks of abandonment, abuse, institutionalisation and exclusion¹⁶. Figure 14 reports the percentages of children who have difficulty in hearing, seeing, communicating, comprehending, learning, moving and coping with changes, emotions and relationships¹⁷. About 5% of children aged 2 to 17 have difficulty in at least one domain. Again, we see the prevalence highest for the B40.

Figure 14: Share of children with at least one form of functional difficulty/disability, by income group, 2019

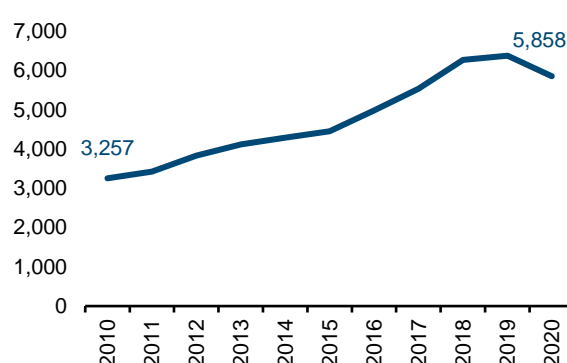


Note: For children aged 2 – 17 years.
Source: IPH (2020)

Child abuse and exploitation

Decline in income may drive families to force children into abusive and exploitative situations. From 2010 to 2020, the number of children in need of care and protection from abandonment, abuse and neglect increased from 3,257 to almost 5,900 (Figure 15). Even if adjusted for population size, the share of cases as a percentage of children population has increased from 0.047% in 2015 to 0.063% in 2020¹⁸.

Figure 15: Cases of children in need of care and protection, 2010 – 2020



Source: JKM (Various years)

Poverty and low income have also been linked to child marriage and child labour. These forms of exploitation deny a child from enjoying childhood and adolescence, and forces them into adulthood. Between 2007 and 2017, Malaysia registered about 15,000 child marriages¹⁹. In 2018, 1,856 children were married with 90% being girls, 83% Muslim and 17% non-Muslim²⁰. The report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights claims the employment of child labourers in Malaysia²¹. Unfortunately, the extent of the problem is unclear as there is no official data on this matter²².

¹⁶ UNICEF (2022)

¹⁷ Information on functional difficulties among children aged two to 17 was obtained from their parents/guardians through the Child Functioning Module. Parents/Guardians assess difficulties in the functional domains such as vision, communication, comprehension, etc. against a rating scale. This rating scale changes to fit the functional domain it pertains to. For example, the rating scale “No difficulty”, “Some difficulty”, “A lot of difficulty” and “Cannot do at all” is used when assessing difficulty in seeing. Children who have a lot of difficulty or cannot do certain functionings, experience certain difficulties daily or exhibit certain behaviours a lot more are defined as having some form of functional difficulty. Source: IPH (2020)

¹⁸ JKM (Various years), DOS (2022b), DOS (2018), authors’ calculations

¹⁹ UNICEF (2020)

²⁰ UNICEF (2020)

²¹ UNHRC (2020)

²² The Sun Daily (2020)

Climate change and natural disasters disrupt the wellbeing of children

Climate change has increased the number of weather-related disasters by a factor of five from 1970 to 2019²³. Just 2021 alone, Malaysia experienced devastating losses from floods resulting in 58 deaths, 208,643 victims and destruction of homes and livelihoods²⁴. The Department of Statistics estimates that the floods in late-2021 alone caused up to RM6.1b (or 0.4% of GDP) in damages²⁵.

Children are particularly vulnerable during disasters as they have higher susceptibility to diseases and malnutrition²⁶. UKM, UMS, and UNICEF (2021) conducted studies in Malaysia focusing on climate change and concluded that children, especially from marginalised groups, are affected by climate-related impacts in five ways:

1. **Children become more exposed** to diseases, hazardous substances and pollutants, and susceptible to infections. This is compounded by low awareness of personal hygiene, lack of access to clean water and improper garbage disposal.
2. **Children's learning affected** as flooding, haze, etc. can block access to schools. Students may also be less focused during hot weather because of discomfort.
3. **Children cannot access basic services and necessities** such as food, healthcare and water. This is more critical for those in isolated areas.
4. **Children's families experience income instability**. For example, parents engaged in climate-sensitive economic activities such as fishing cannot go out to sea because of heavy rain.
5. **Children more exposed to hazards and threats to wellbeing** arising from damage to infrastructure as well as being confined to small spaces for long periods.

²³ WMO (2021)

²⁴ NADMA (2022)

²⁵ DOS (2022c), DOS (2022a), KRI calculations

²⁶ UKM, UMS, and UNICEF (2021)

Conclusion

Poverty and deprivations have grave consequences during childhood and can transcend to adulthood if not rectified early on. Children who grow up impoverished suffer from poor living standards, develop fewer skills and earn lower wages as adults, creating a cycle of poverty, limiting upward social mobility and increasing inequality.

As World Children's Day proclaims its theme of 'inclusion, for every child', this ideal is still far from reality in Malaysia. Children are more likely to live in poverty and handed unequal opportunities in education and health. We also see a rise in the number of children abused and exploited, with climate change serving to aggravate problems further. While these challenges may seem insurmountable, we must make a difference for our children because we can.

There is no silver bullet, but setting a social protection floor for all children is a vital first step to level the playing field. The current lack of statutory social protection for child-specific risks results in families seeking assistance without any legal foundation, namely from government agencies or non-government organisations. These assistance schemes are precarious, only intended for those deemed 'deserving' and excludes those who fall through the cracks.

As all children are vulnerable to poverty and child-specific issues are prevalent across income groups, a universal social protection floor that automatically ensures basic income security through universal child benefit, and access to education, care, nutrition and any other necessary goods and services must be set. For a prosperous Malaysia, all children should have an equitable place at the starting line.

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